What is bibliolatry? - Answer The Bible

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Bibliolatry refers to excessive reverence or devotion to the Bible itself, rather than the divine truths contained within it. The term combines the Greek words for “book” (biblio) and “worship” (latreia). While the Bible is central to the Christian faith, some Christians argue that treating it as an idol or elevating it above God is a form of idolatry.

The Bible itself condemns idolatry and emphasizes that God alone is worthy of worship (Exodus 20:3-5). However, some Christians have placed undue focus on the Bible itself, rather than using it as a means to grow closer to God. Possible signs of bibliolatry include:

– Treating the Bible as a talisman or lucky charm, believing mere possession or repetition of verses guarantees blessing. While the Bible speaks of the power and authority of God’s Word (Hebrews 4:12), simply carrying or quoting the Bible does not guarantee results.

– Looking to the Bible for direct guidance on every life decision. The Bible provides godly principles for wise living, but some decisions require prayer and discernment beyond biblical proof texts.

– Focusing on surface-level reading or rigid interpretation, without seeking the Spirit’s illumination. The Bible teaches that spiritual truth must be discerned spiritually (1 Corinthians 2:13-14).

– Debating minor doctrinal points while ignoring weightier aspects of biblical teaching. The Bible calls us to major on the majors, not endlessly dispute disputable matters (Romans 14:1).

– Using the Bible to prove a point in an argument, without genuine openness to God’s correction. Scripture teaches we should approach God’s Word humbly, not proudly (James 1:21).

– Treating biblical study as an end in itself, rather than a means of knowing God.

The Bible affirms that eternal life is found in Christ Himself, not merely knowing Scripture (John 5:39).

In response to potential bibliolatry, Christians emphasize the purpose of Scripture is to point people to Christ (John 5:39). The Bible is inerrant and authoritatively guides the church. However, it finds its full meaning and authority in connection to the Holy Spirit and living relationship with the God it reveals. Just as an idol cannot save, so the Bible apart from the Spirit produces empty religion devoid of true transformation (2 Timothy 3:5).

Karl Barth, an influential 20th century theologian, appealed for proper reverence for Scripture by stating: “The Bible is not revelation and does not contain a divine doctrine… but it attests revelation and doctrine” (Church Dogmatics 1.2, 484). In other words, the Bible is not itself divine but is rather a divinely-inspired witness to God’s revelation in Christ.

John Calvin warned against those who claim devotion to Scripture but use it legalistically as a tool for “wicked and perverse dogmatism” (Commentary on 2 Timothy 3:16). He argued that the Bible profits us only when approached with humility and read in light of its overall purpose – to cultivate saving faith in Christ.

In summary, bibliolatry elevates the Bible to the place reserved for God alone. It reflects a misguided faith placed in the mere possession of Scripture. The Bible calls us to find our life and authority in relationship with the God who inspired its message. Scripture serves as an essential, Christ-centered means of knowing God truly. But it was never meant to be treated as an end in itself. When approached in faith, the Bible does not draw us to fixate on itself, but propels us toward greater love for the God of the Word.

Biblical Support and Teaching

The Bible itself warns against idolatry and misuse of Scripture in a way that displace proper reverence for God:

– “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3). This first of the Ten Commandments calls for exclusive devotion to God, forbidding idolatry in all its forms.

– “Guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). John closes his letter with a solemn warning against idolatry, suggesting it was a real threat requiring vigilance.

– “We know that ‘an idol has no real existence’ and that ‘there is no God but one'” (1 Corinthians 8:4). Paul acknowledges idols have no true spiritual power or existence apart from the one true God.

– “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable…” (2 Timothy 3:16). This verse affirms the divine inspiration and spiritual profit of Scripture while avoiding making it an object of worship itself.

– “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). Jesus chides the religious leaders for looking to Scripture while missing its central message pointing to Himself.

– “And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters… There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures” (2 Peter 3:15-16). Peter affirms Paul’s writings as Scripture while warning that they can be misinterpreted.

– “But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.” (1 John 2:5) John draws attention to obeying God’s word rather than just possessing it intellectually.

The prophets continually admonished Israel for empty, hypocritical worship and failing to honor God despite having the Scriptures:

– “Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness…to let the oppressed go free… is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth…and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters do not fail.” (Isaiah 58:6-11). Here Isaiah calls out Israel for priding itself on ritual fasting and worship while neglecting true righteousness and justice.

– “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them… But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” (Amos 5:21-24). Through Amos, God rejects Israel’s religious services, requiring justice and righteousness instead.

– “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.” (1 Samuel 15:22). Samuel rebukes Saul’s hypocrisy in presuming ritual sacrifices compensate for disobedience.

These passages provide biblical precedent for denouncing empty religion that claims devotion to Scripture while compromising obedience and justice. They serve as warnings against allowing the good gift of Scripture to become an idol that displaces the rightful worship of God.

Historical and Modern Controversies

While bibliolatry has existed as a temptation throughout church history, several key controversies provoked increased debate over misuse of Scripture:

Protestant Reformation Critiques

– Martin Luther maintained that Scripture alone has ultimate spiritual authority, not traditions of the church. However, he warned against using the Bible in a rigid, legalistic way that misses its overall gospel message centered on Christ by faith alone.

– John Calvin also promoted Scripture as the final authority while warning against “wicked and perverse dogmatism” that twists the Bible for manipulative purposes rather than humbly seeking God’s truth.

Enlightenment Era Debates

– Critiques of Protestant scholasticism led some Enlightenment thinkers to charge that Protestant Biblicism fostered narrow dogmatism and divisions over secondary issues not central to Christ.

– Defenders like John Wesley affirmed that the problem was not Scripture itself but its misuse for purposes contrary to its holistic message. Wesley taught the joining of God’s Word and Spirit is key to proper interpretation and application.

Modern Controversies

– Karl Barth rejected views that reduced the Bible to a “paper pope” and instead emphasized it as a unique witness to God’s revelation, which must be encountered on God’s terms.

– Some strands of modern fundamentalism have been charged with over-emphasizing biblical inerrancy while neglecting meaningful application of Scripture to complex contemporary challenges.

– Debates over issues like creation vs. evolution, roles of women, and sexual ethics have often fixated on specific verses in contention, obscuring the Bible's core moral and theological teachings.

Dangers and Effects of Bibliolatry

Treating the Bible itself as an object of idolatry, rather than a means of knowing God, can lead to significant dangers, including:

– A tendency to rigid literalism, missing the nuances of context and genre that should inform interpretation according to authorial intent and the guidance of the Spirit.

– Using Scripture in a quasi-magical way without regard for authorial intent and redemptive context.

– Proof-texting and selectivity in using specific verses to prove preconceived ideas while neglecting other material.

– Weaponizing verses to attack those with whom one disagrees, lacking Christ-like character in dealing with opponents.

– Majoring on the minors and dividing over secondary theological disputes.

– A hypocritical mindset that presumes mere biblical knowledge guarantees righteousness.

– Substituting relationship with God for principles about God. An intellectual, legalistic religion devoid of spiritual power.

– Missing the forest for the trees by focusing on isolated verses rather than central themes.

– Failing to read and apply Scripture in light of Christ's teaching and the gospel message.

– Neglecting personal obedience in favor of textual study and theological debate.

Ultimately, bibliolatry reflects a self-centered desire to control Scripture rather than humbly be controlled by the truths it conveys. It elevates human interpretation above responsiveness to the Spirit. And it misses the ultimate purpose of Scripture to build faith and maturity in serving God and others from a heart transformed by His love and grace. It produces rigid religion devoid of true justice, mercy and faithfulness (Matthew 23:23).

Principles for Avoiding Bibliolatry

Christians seeking to embrace a healthy posture toward Scripture can avoid bibliolatry by upholding principles such as:

– Approaching Scripture with humility and openness to the Spirit's guidance.

– Reading passages in context: literary, historical, cultural, and canonical.

– Majoring on the majors by emphasizing doctrines and themes central to the gospel message conveyed across multiple passages.

– Allowing clearer passages to inform more obscure portions and interpretation.

– Embracing the full counsel of Scripture rather than isolating convenient verses.

– Remembering the purpose of Scripture is transformative: to save, teach, rebuke, correct, train in righteousness (2 Tim 3:15-17).

– Meditating on Scripture devotionally with receptiveness, beyond just intellectual analysis.

– Applying God's Word in daily obedience, not merely acquiring knowledge.

– Interpreting and applying Scripture communally, in dialogue with other believers.

– Focusing on living and sharing gospel truths more than arguing secondary doctrines.

– Grounding one's identity in relationship with Christ, not just knowledge about Him.

– Ensuring reverence for the Bible increases love for the God it reveals.

Scripture stands as the church's final doctrinal authority and essential light for

guidance. But it only fulfills this purpose when approached as a means of encountering God on His terms, with openness to the Spirit’s illumination. The Bible directs us beyond itself, pointing us to Christ and empowering our loving service and gospel witness. By upholding this Christ-centered perspective, the church can avoid both neglect of Scripture and bibliolatry, embracing the Bible’s irreplaceable role as a witness to God’s redemptive work in Christ for the blessing of all nations.

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